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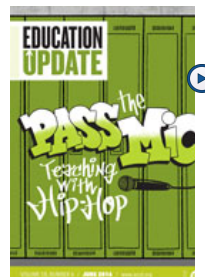
Pass the Mic: Teaching with Hip-Hop

Planning for Great Group Work

Willona M. Sloan

On the surface, having students work in groups may seem simple enough; however, there's much more to it. Effective group work provides the space and structure for students to work together and learn from one another. For those reasons, group work can be an enriching educational experience—or it can be a total waste of time.

What makes the difference? *Planning*. Proper planning for group work includes laying the groundwork for collaboration, assigning groups that work well together, developing group-worthy tasks, and determining ways to assess group and individual contributions.



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To prepare a classroom of diverse students to work well together, start by building a group work culture. "It is essential, from the first day of school, that teachers have students collaborate. It sets the norm that 'we collaborate here' and that it is part of the culture of the classroom," says Andrew Miller, ASCD Faculty member and instructional coach at Shanghai American School in China.

Miller recommends using low-stakes collaborative exercises to help students understand what's expected of them when working in groups. For example, he once had students team up to see who could build the tallest structure with marshmallows and chopsticks.

"It was a creative activity that was not graded," Miller explains. "Students were allowed to not only express their ideas and have fun but also experience and practice working together. At the end of the activity, we had a great discussion about what worked and what we could improve upon."

Miller also cocreated rubrics with his students to set criteria for collaborative work. Students identified expectations such as respecting one another's personal space and being receptive to peer feedback. Miller then expanded on these expectations in the rubric to show levels ranging from novice to experienced. He had students self-assess their performance, and he used the rubric to offer timely, specific feedback. Then, when students worked on more intensive group tasks, they had the tools to be respectful group members.

Another way to ease into group work is to have students work in pairs. In *Productive Group Work* (ASCD, 2009), authors Nancy Frey, Douglas Fisher, and Sandi Everlove offer tips for creating a group work-ready classroom. "Start small, with lots of short, partner-driven conversations, so that [students] can foster the interpersonal skills needed for more complex tasks," the authors write. "In the same way that jumping on the gas pedal consumes too much fuel, beginning group work with a very complex task will tend to tax both you and your learners."

The authors also recommend providing students with opportunities to practice sharing ideas and using academic language to make arguments, present facts, and politely disagree. By laying the groundwork with proper language skills, teachers can build up to group work where multiple students with varying perspectives can effectively communicate their ideas.

Plan Backwards

For Starr Sackstein, a teacher at World Journalism Preparatory School in Flushing, N.Y., group work is a constant. Her students are responsible for completing an independent assessment at the end of each unit. To prepare them, Sackstein plans backwards from the final assessment to see which skills students will need to master. She figures out ways to teach these necessary skills using classroom lectures, assignments, and group work such as discussions and projects.

"Students will engage in small-group discussions and from that [begin to work on] a larger group project where they will practice a particular skill, which they will integrate into an independent project that will later be assessed," says Sackstein, who authored *Teaching Students to Self-Assess* (ASCD, 2015). "They work together to collaborate and problem solve, and then they have to apply what they have learned."

For example, the school year begins with a poetry unit during which students learn how to identify the literary devices poets use to make meaning. At the beginning of the unit, the class reads poems and discusses the different choices the poets make within the texts. Next, in small groups, students look at a more complex poem and discuss how the poet is making meaning. Then, each small group creates a video tutorial that teaches the class about a specific poetic device. Finally, students write their own individual papers and incorporate what they learned about the various devices.

In this case, Sackstein uses backwards planning to note what skills and knowledge she needs kids to master for the final paper. She provides an overview of how poetic devices work and has students practice using the skills as they work together.

If one group is assigned metaphors, those students discuss how metaphors work, clarify their understanding, and develop a video together to teach the rest of the class about metaphors. Students work together to gather the information and teach one another what they will need to know to write their final papers.

Assign Groups with Intention

Sackstein doesn't use the same group work tactics with each unit nor does she use the same groups. Part of her planning includes thinking about how each group will be assigned, depending on the length and nature of the activity. When group work will be complete over a short period of time, Sackstein usually allows students to group themselves; other times, she tries to balance the groups so they represent a mix of strengths.

"Sometimes it [requires] a matching of skills, so each student offers a different strength to develop a whole," she explains. "Sometimes has to do with productivity, and other times it is chemistry. We are at a small school and kids have known each other a long time, so sometimes a random mix is also good."

Another strategy she employs is grouping students together who have typically been "dead weight" in their previous groups. Without stronger teammates to lean on, these students find that they have to step up and motivate one another.

The key to assigning groups that work well together is knowing your students, emphasize Sackstein and Miller. To place them in groups where they will excel, it's important to understand what students need, how they will interact, and how they will learn best.

"The two most common missteps teachers make when executing group work are (1) not having a group-worthy task and (2) not requiring individual accountability."

Develop Group-Worthy Tasks

But what happens when group work gets off track? "The two most common missteps teachers make when executing group work are (1) not having a group-worthy task and (2) not requiring individual accountability," says curriculum designer and author David Hunter.

"[Group-worthy tasks] help a student recognize her or his own contribution within a group in addition to the success of the group overall. Not assigning a group-worthy task or having some level of accountability can easily lead to uneven student contributions," Hunter explains.

Hunter points to Rachel A. Lotan's *Educational Leadership* article, "[Group-Worthy Tasks](#)," to outline just what makes up such tasks. Lotan explains that group-worthy tasks

- Are open ended and require complex problem solving.
- Provide students with multiple entry points to the task and multiple opportunities to show intellectual competence.
- Deal with discipline-based, intellectually important content.
- Require positive interdependence as well as individual accountability.
- Include clear criteria for the evaluation of the group's product.

One example of a group-worthy task, writes Lotan, is having groups analyze conflicting perspectives of actors in the Bay of Pigs and Cuban Missile Crisis. Students are instructed to create two scenarios for differing outcomes of these historic events.

Developing group-worthy tasks requires research and deliberate planning— and students must be given the proper scaffolding to work through the tasks.

Keep Students Accountable

The balancing act of group work rests in holding both the group *and* individual students accountable for their learning. Miller recommends using the jigsaw strategy or roundtable discussions to demand that every student has a stake in the team task.

Teachers can gauge individual accountability with quizzes, independent writing assignments, or other formative assessments. Miller had students submit research notes, traditional worksheets, and even oral reflections they recorded using their phones or computers.

"These assessments allowed me to see how students were doing independently and within the context of the group," he says. Although the optics of a group might look one way, individual assessments provide a clearer picture.

Plan for Group Dynamics

Part of working together is being together, which can lead to all types of interpersonal issues such as personality conflicts, disagreements, and overactive socializing. Make a plan for dealing with these issues before they derail your group work.

In Sackstein's class, students do most of their group work in the classroom—which allows her to sit with each group, ask questions, evaluate where they are in the process, and provide feedback.


When students have concerns, she intervenes. "I've had students say in their reflections that they felt their ideas weren't honored. I think that presents an opportunity for a teacher to intercede and shift the balance," says Sackstein.

In such a situation, "I might put the group on the spot to spell out what each person is supposed to be doing [clarifying each student's role]. If I notice that one student is taking a lot of ownership, it's easier for me as an outsider to say to them, 'I appreciate that you are stepping up, but what do [the other group members] think about what's going on here?' That provides an opportunity for all students to be heard by their group mates and by me as well."

Embrace the Mess

Most teachers and experts would agree that group work is *not* one size fits all. Strategies that worked in one class may fall short in another.

"The most important thing is to know your kids," reminds Sackstein. She recommends asking students for feedback after the first few group assignments to determine what's working. Stay flexible and adjust your approach as needed.

On a final note, try to come to terms with the reality that group work is messy. "You should be comfortable with messy and noisy because there's really no way to make kids collaborate with each other quietly," concludes Sackstein. "You have to wrap your brain around what learning looks like and [accept that] noisy and chaotic can be really good." 

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